Moses Maimonides
Epistle to Yemen (1172)

TRANSLATED BY JOEL L. KRAEMER

[S 82]

From me, even I Moses, son of Rabbi Maimon the judge, son of Rabbi Joseph the sage, son of Rabbi Isaac the master, son of Rabbi Obadiah the judge (may the memory of the righteous be a blessing).

Strengthen the hands that are slack, and make firm the tottering knees. [Isa. 35:3] [1]

To the honored, great, and holy master and teacher Jacob, the kind, dear, and revered sage (may his Rock preserve him), son of the honored, great, and holy master and teacher Nathanel Fayyūmī (may the spirit of the Lord cause him to rest) [Isa. 63:14], *and to all our brothers, our scholars, all the disciples of the communities in the land of Yemen (may their Rock and Creator preserve and protect them). Amen, Neṣaḥ, Selah.*[1]

Just as the stock bears witness to the true quality of the roots, and flowing waters testify to the excellence of their springs, so has a faithful shoot sprouted from the roots of truth and righteousness, and a great river has gushed forth from the spring of mercy in the land of Yemen, watering all gardens and making buds bloom. It flows gently, quenching the weary and thirsty in the wilderness; all wayfarers by land and by sea satisfy themselves thereby. Thus, they proclaimed in Sepharad and in Sepharvaim,[2] *from the one end of heaven and to the other* [see Deut. 4:32]: *"Ho, ye every one that thirsteth come for water"* [Isa. 55:1].

Merchants and all traders unanimously reply to all who ask that they have found among the dwellers of Yemen a lovely and pleasant plantation [see Isa. 17:10] *with faithful shepherds, a goodly pasture* [Ezek. 34:14]

This translation is based principally upon the critical edition of the Judeo-Arabic text as established by Isaac Shailat. Consideration has been given to alternative readings reported in the critical edition of Abraham S. Halkin. All words in the text that are recognizably Hebrew or Aramaic—which includes the opening paragraphs—have been set in italics. Paragraphing and punctuation have been supplied and to that extent may be regarded as the translator's interpretation. Boldfaced numerals (between square brackets) refer to page breaks in two editions of the text. Numbers alone refer to the Halkin edition, *Moses Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen*, 1–3 and (thereafter even-numbered pages only) 4–106. Numbers preceded by "S" refer to the Judeo-Arabic text in the Shailat edition, *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides*, 1:82–112. This translation is published with the permission of Joel L. Kraemer and of the Publications Committee of the Yale Judaica Series of Yale University. The notes to this text have been adapted from an edition being prepared by Joel L. Kramer for that series.

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where everyone who is lean shall become fat. They are a shelter for the poor, giving him his bread, a support for the wealthy, receiving him gladly; the Sabian caravans look forward to them [Job 6:19]. *Their hand is extended to every traveler; their home is open wide. With them all find rest; sorrow and sighing flee* [Isa. 35:10]. *All day they study the Torah of Moses; they follow the path Rab Ashi has prescribed. They pursue justice* [Isa. 51:1], *repair the breach* [see Ezek. 27:9], *and keep the roots of the Torah firmly in their place. With their speech they gather the dispersed people of the Lord and fulfill all the commandments punctiliously* [2] *in their communities. There is no breach, no going forth, and no outcry in their broad places* [see Ps. 144:14].

Blessed is the Lord who has not let perish [Ruth 4:14] *those who fulfill the Torah and keep its laws in coastlands far away* [see Isa. 66:19], *as He promised us in His goodness and mercy through His servant Isaiah. For it is to you He was referring in informing us: "From the uttermost part of the earth have we heard songs"* [Isa. 24:16]. *May God help you maintain law and custom, preserve justice and righteousness, preserve His command and His law, and adhere to His covenant. Amen, Neṣaḥ, Selah.*

When we departed from the West to gaze upon the graciousness of the Lord, to frequent His holy place [see Ps. 27:4], *we heard that he* [i.e., the addressee's father] *had gone to his eternal rest. May God grant him His justice and goodness. May he enter into peace and rest on his couch* [see Isa. 57:2], *and may He send him angels of mercy. May he rest and rise up for his lot at the End of Days* [see Dan. 12:13]. *This is the sign, our dear friend, delight of our soul, that God was pleased with his deeds and that He will award him twofold and grant him peace, by telling that you, his son, will have taken his place in maintaining law and custom, preserving justice and righteousness, preserving His command and His law, and adhering to His covenant. May the Lord your God be with you as He was with your fathers. May He not leave you or forsake you* [see 1 Kings 8:57]. *May He give you broad understanding to judge His people* [see 1 Kings 3:9]. *"May His words never depart out of your mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed," as he spoke* [see Isa. 59:21]. *May you succeed your father as leader* [*nagid*] *of His people, and may God set your name above his.*

When your letter, our dear friend, reached us in Egypt, all ears were pleased at hearing it, and it was a delight to the eyes [Gen. 3:6]. *It bore witness in our presence that you are one of the servants of the Lord* [S 83] *who dwell in His portion and camp at His standard; of those who pursue the Torah, love its laws, and watch at its gates* [Prov. 8:34]. *May the Lord open to you* [Deut. 28:12] *its hidden things and fill your heart with its treasures,*

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make its crown your leading crown and place its necklace upon your neck [see Prov. 1:9]. *May its words be a lamp unto your feet and a light to your ways* [see Ps. 119:105], *and in them may your name be perpetuated* [see Gen. 48:16]. *"And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the Lord is called upon thee; and they shall be afraid of thee"* [Deut. 28:10].

You said in your letter, our friend, that you have heard some of our brethren, our next of kin [see Ezek. 11:15] *(may their Rock preserve them), extol me above many others* [see Neh. 7:2], *repeatedly comparing me to the mighty Geonim. They merely expressed their affection for me, speaking and writing in their kindness and goodness. Listen to "a word fitly spoken"* [Prov. 25:11] *by me and pay no heed to others. I am one of the least of the sages of Spain whose adornment has been stripped* [see Exod. 33:5] *in Exile. Ever vigilant in my studies, I have not* [3] *attained the learning of my ancestors. For we suffered hard times; we reposed not in tranquility; we toiled and had no rest* [Lam. 5:5]. *How can the law become lucid to an exile from city to city and from country to country? Yet I ran after the reapers in all their paths and gleaned the ears of grain* [see Ruth 2:2, 7], *gathering the robust and stout without rejecting the lean and withered* [see Gen. 41:22–23]. *Now I have stayed home for a while* [see Ruth 2:7]. *If not for the Lord who was with us* [Ps. 124:1] *and for what our fathers have told us* [Ps. 78:3], *I would not have collected the little I did and from which I constantly bestow.*

You say in your letter that our friend and pupil, Rabbi Solomon, the deputy priest, who is wise and discerning, praises me lavishly. He has spoken extravagantly out of his love and sympathy [Isa. 63:9]. *May his Rock protect him; may he be like a flourishing vine; and may He restore him to us safe and in good cheer.*

As to the other topics of your letter, which you asked me to address, I have seen fit to write the response in the language and idiom of Kedar [i.e., Arabic] *so that he may run that reads it* [Hab. 2:2], *all the people, including the children and the women—for all your communities should understand the response to its topics.* [4]

What you mention concerning the affair of this insurgent[3] in Yemen who *decreed forced apostasy* [*shemad*] *on Israel* by forcing those in all the places he had conquered to apostatize, as the *Berbers* [al-*kena'ani*] had done in the Maghrib—this news has disheartened us and shocked all of our communities, and rightly so. This is *an evil tiding; both ears of everyone who hears about it will tingle* [see 1 Sam. 3:11; 2 Kings 21:12]. Our hearts languish and our minds are confused, our strength falters because of

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these great *troubles* that have come upon us, the *forced apostasy* at the two ends of the world, *East and West, so that Israel was in the midst, some on this side, and some on that* [Josh. 8:22]. And concerning this kind of trying and alarming time the prophet said, interceding for us and praying [**S 84**] for us: *I said, O Lord God, refrain! How will Jacob survive? He is so small* [Amos 7:5].

This is a matter which no devout person should neglect nor should one who has faith in *Moses* disregard. These are surely *messianic travails* from the seeing and experiencing of which the *sages* (peace be upon them) sought God's protection [see Babylonian Talmud (hereafter B.T.), Sanhedrin 98b]. The prophets trembled when they imagined them, as *Isaiah* said when he described them: *My heart pants, fearfulness affrights me; the twilight I longed for has been turned into trembling* [Isa. 21:4]. And God has proclaimed in His book woe unto those who shall witness them, saying: *Alas, who shall live when God does this?* [Num. 24:23].

You mentioned that the hearts of some folk have wavered, [6] doubt has come over them, and their faith has been shaken; whereas others have not lost their certitude, nor have they become disquieted. We have a divine warning concerning this matter, for the lord [sayyid] *Daniel* made clear to us what God made known to him, that if our stay in the *Exile* is prolonged and our calamities persist, many would renounce the religion, have doubts, and go astray. This is because they would witness our impotence, the power of our adversaries, and their dominion over us. Still others, however, would not doubt or be disturbed in their faith. He states: *Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but those who are wise shall understand* [Dan. 12:10]. Then he made clear to us that even the men of understanding and intelligence who would withstand calamities and persist in their faith *in God and in His servant Moses* would confront events more arduous and worse than those they withstood, so that some of them would have qualms and err, and only a few would remain pure [in faith]. Thus its saying: *Some of the wise shall fall* [Dan. 11:35].

And now, O our brethren, all of you must listen and consider what I am presenting to you. Instill it in the youths, children, and women, so that their weakened and unsettled faith may be made firm, and that unremitting certainty be planted in their souls. This is—may God save us and you—the true and valid religion, revealed to us by [Moses] the chief of all the prophets, former and latter, by means of which God has distinguished us from all of mankind, as he says: *Yet it was to your fathers that the Lord was drawn in His love for them, so that He chose* [8] *you, their lineal descendants, from*

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among all the peoples [Deut. 10:15]. This was not by our merit, but by favor and grace on account of our ancestors having known Him and obeyed Him, as He, the Exalted, says: *It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples* [Deut. 7:7].

This is because He has [S 85] singled us out by His laws and ordinances, and our preeminence over others was evident in His rules and regulations as He, the Exalted, says, recounting His loving-kindness to us: *And what great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances as perfect?* [Deut. 4:8]. Therefore, all the nations [milal][4] have fought against us out of envy and tyranny, and the kings of the earth have devoted themselves to pursuing us unjustly and malevolently on account of it. They sought to oppose God, but He cannot be opposed. Ever since then every king, or tyrant, or opponent, or violent conqueror has made it his aim and foremost concern to destroy our Law and abrogate our religion by violence and force of arms, like *Amalek, Sisera, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Hadrian*, and others of their sort. This is one of the two classes that strive to overcome the divine will.

The second class comprises the cleverest and most learned of the nations [milal], such as the Syrians, Persians, and Greeks. They too wish to destroy and abrogate the Law by means of arguments they conjure up and by means of disputation [mujādala] that they compose. They seek to abrogate the Law and to erase its effects by means of their compositions, just as the conquerors seek to do it by their swords. *But neither the one nor the other shall succeed.* For [10] a guarantee of God (may He be blessed and exalted) has been given to us previously by means of *Isaiah* that every conqueror who seeks to defeat our Law and nullify it by his instruments of war—God will destroy this instrument so that it will not succeed. This is a metaphorical way of saying that his aspiration will never be realized. And likewise, every disputant who will aspire to nullify what we possess—God will abort his proof [ḥujja] and nullify and reject it so that it will not last. As God (may He be blessed and exalted) said, promising: *No weapon formed against you shall succeed, and every tongue that contends with you at law you shall defeat* [Isa. 54:17].

Both of them suppose that this is an edifice that can be demolished. Conspiring to undermine its firmly planted foundations, they only increase their misery and toil. The edifice persists firmly as it is, while the Truth [i.e., God] derides and ridicules them because they seek with their feeble minds the like of which no human being can aspire to. The prophet [David] says, describing their endeavor and the Truth's deriding them: *Let us break the*

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cords of their yoke, shake off their ropes from us. He who is enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord mocks at them [Ps. 2:3–4]. We have been tried and afflicted by these two factions incessantly during the time of our political sovereignty and intermittently during the time of our *Exile*.

Then a new faction [farīq] arose that combined the two positions, I mean, conquest with argumentation and controversy, supposing that this was more effective in removing the trace of the community [milla]. So it undertook to claim prophecy and bring a new Law contrary to [**12**] the Law of God, and to say that it too came [**S 86**] from God as His true word. Thus doubt and perplexity [ḥayra] would come about, for one is opposed to the other, while both of them are ascribed to one God; and this would pave the way for the destruction of both. This is a wondrous contrivance done by a very malicious person, for he seeks the death of his enemy and his own survival; and when this is beyond him, he hazards a plan which kills both himself and his enemy.

The first to hold this view was *Jesus the Nazarene* (*may his bones be ground to dust*). He was an *Israelite* because his mother was an *Israelite*. For if his father was a *gentile* and his mother an *Israelite*, he is an *Israelite*, since the principle [lit., root] among us is that *the offspring of a union between a gentile or slave with an Israelite woman is legitimate*. We only call him a *bastard* by way of hyperbole. He deceived people into thinking that he was sent by God to explain difficulties in the *Torah*, and that he was the *Messiah* promised by every prophet. He interpreted the *Torah* in a way that leads to the complete nullification of the Law, to suspending all its commandments, and to transgressing all its prohibitions in accordance with his intention and aim. The *sages* (*may their memory be a blessing*), aware of his aim before his fame became firmly established among the community [milla], treated him as he deserved. We received prior warning of this by *Daniel* who said that an impudent and rebellious *Israelite* would aspire to destroy the religion by claiming prophecy and presuming great things, namely, that he is *Messiah*; and he said that God would cause him to stumble as he did, to wit: *The children of the impudent among your people shall make bold to claim prophecy, but they shall fail* [Dan. 11:14]. [**14**]

A long time after him a religion ascribed to him became prevalent among *the descendants of Esau*, although this was not the aim for which he hoped. He did not harm *Israel*, nor did anyone have any doubt about him, either collectively or individually. For they saw clearly his ruin, defeat, and falling into our hands until he met his end.

After him arose another individual[5] [i.e., Muhammad] who followed in his path, for [Jesus] had opened the way for him. He added to this an-

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other objective, namely, seeking sovereignty and obedience to himself, and he innovated what is well known.

All of them wish to imitate the religion of God (may He be praised). But the divine artifact cannot be compared to the human artifact save by someone naive who lacks experience of both. The difference between our religion and the religions that are compared to it is similar to the difference between the living, rational human being and a statue skillfully produced out of marble, wood, silver, or gold, so that it comes to resemble a human being. When someone ignorant of sovereign wisdom or divine artistry sees a statue that superficially resembles a man in its shape, design, dimension, and color, he supposes that its composition is exactly like that of a man because he is ignorant of the interior of [**16**] each. [S 87] But the wise person, who knows the interior of both, is aware that the interior of the statue is not at all skillfully made, whereas man's interior contains true wonders and matters attesting to the Creator's wisdom: The distension of his nerves in his muscles and their ramification, and the joining of his sinews and points of their connections, the intertwining of their ligaments and their manner of growth, the structure of his bones and the joints, the egress of his pulsating and nonpulsating blood vessels and their branching out, the setting of his limbs into one another, the open and concealed parts, every one of them in the appropriate measure, form, and place.

Thus if one ignorant of the secrets of revelation [waḥy] and the inner meanings of our Law compares this Law with the contrived Law [i.e., Islam], he will presume a similarity between them. For he finds both prohibited and permitted things in the Law of God and prohibited and permitted things in this other as well. The Law of God contains actions and acts of devotion, and this other has actions and acts of devotion. The Law of God commands and prohibits, promises and threatens, as does this one.

Were he to understand the inner meaning, he would recognize that the entire *wisdom* of the true divine Law is in its inner meaning. There is no positive or negative command save that its inner meaning contains things that bring benefit in human perfection and remove any impediments to the achievement of that perfection; and that induce ethical and rational virtues [**18**] among the many [jumhūr] according to their capacity [to receive them] and among the elite according to their apprehension. And through these the divine community [jamʿ] becomes preeminent, attaining both perfections: I mean, the first perfection, which is his continued existence in the world under the best conditions befitting a human being, and the second perfection, which is apprehending the intelligibles as they are in accordance with human capacity.

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Those imitative religions contain things having no inner meaning, only emulation, imitation, and simulation, whereby the imitator intends to glorify himself and to insinuate that he resembles so and so; but his ignominy is obvious to those who apprehend. And he becomes the object of mirth and derision just as a monkey is ridiculed when it imitates human actions.

We have received from God, the Exalted, through *Daniel*, prior warning that this would happen, and that at the end of this dominion an insurgent [qā'im] would arise who would bring a religion resembling the true religion and speak of great things, namely, that a book was revealed to him, and that God spoke to him and he to God, and other things within his prolix discourse. Describing the rise of the Arabs at the end of the Roman kingdom, *Daniel* compared the ascent of this individual [i.e., Muhammad] and his defeating the Roman, Persian, and Greek kingdoms with a horn that grew long and powerful, according to what has been made clear from [S 88] that text to the many and the elite, for these are obvious meanings which can bear no other interpretation. He said: *While I was gazing upon these horns, a new little horn spouted up among them;* [20] *three of the older horns were uprooted to make room for it. There were eyes in this horn like those of a man, and a mouth that spoke arrogantly* [Dan. 7:8]. Consider how wise and uncanny this parable is. He said that he saw the small horn which was growing. While wondering at its great length, it became long and threw three horns down in front of it; and, lo and behold, the horn had two eyes similar to human eyes and a mouth speaking great things. That is, he will bring a religion resembling the divine religion, claiming inspiration [waḥy] and prophecy and speaking profusely. And *Daniel* explained to us that he will claim to abrogate this Law and aspire to change it. He said: *And he shall seek to change the seasons and the law* [Dan. 7:25].

But He, the Exalted, explained to [Daniel] that He (may His name be sublime) would destroy him [Muhammad] as result of his arrogance and might, along with all his surviving predecessors [i.e., the Christians]; and that these three who oppose us will all perish: the faction that conquers by the sword, the one which lays claim to proofs, and the one imitating the true religion. If they appear victorious for some time and conquer for a brief or long period, this will not endure.

And so we have an everlasting promise from God that whenever there is a time of *forced apostasy* or [divine] punishment [rujz] God will end it. *David, king of Israel*, speaking by way of *the Holy Spirit* in the name of the people [umma], described the domination of other nations [milal] over it from its very beginning, though they were never able [22] to destroy it,

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notwithstanding the great trials they subjected it to by way of *persecutions* [*shemadot*] and *decrees*. He exclaimed: *Since my youth they have often assailed me, but they have never overcome me* [Ps. 129:2].

You, O our brethren, know that in his time *the wicked Nebuchadnezzar* imposed *idolatry* on all mankind, and no one present was saved except for *Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah* [Dan. 3]. Thereafter God, the Exalted, destroyed him and his law [nāmūs], and so the truth was restored to its original state.

And likewise, during *the Second Commonwealth*, when *the wicked Greek kingdom* was victorious, they *decreed* severe *persecutions* against *Israel* in order to destroy the Law, or so they thought. They compelled them *to profane the Sabbath* and not to circumcise their children, and each person to write on his garment that *he does not have a portion with the Lord God of Israel*, and to engrave this on the horn of his ox and then plow with it. This lasted for fifty-two years.

Thereafter, God destroyed their kingdom and their law together. In every age the *sages* (*may their memory be a blessing*) say: *Once the wicked kingdom decreed such and such a persecution on Israel* [or:] *they decreed against them such and such*. Thereafter God annuls it and removes it along with him who brought it about. And thus they (peace be upon them) said: *The persecution is caused only to be annulled* [B.T., Kethuboth 3b]. [S 89]

God, the Exalted, promised *our father Jacob* (peace be upon him) that although the other nations [milal] would humble and defeat his descendants, they would outlast them. The Exalted said: *Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth* [Gen. 28:14]. That is, although they will be [24] demeaned like the dust, a treading ground for everyone, in the end they will overcome and be victorious. And likewise, according to the proverb, as the dust eventually alights upon the one who treads on it and outlasts him [so Israel will survive its oppressors]. And thus the prophet *Isaiah* (*peace be upon him*) expounded, apprising us from God concerning this community [milla] at the time of its *exile*, that whoever strives to defeat and overcome it will succeed; then eventually God will help it to victory and end its suffering and pain. It says: *A harsh prophecy has been announced to me: The betrayer is betraying, the ravager ravaging. Advance Elam! Lay siege, Media! I have put an end to all her sighing* [Isa. 21:2].

God, the Exalted, has assured us through His prophets that we shall not cease or perish, and we shall remain a preeminent community.[6] As the nonexistence of God, the Exalted, is inconceivable, so our annihilation and removal from the world cannot occur. He declares: *For I the Lord change not; and you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed* [Mal. 3:6]. He has

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likewise announced to us and promised (may His name be exalted) that it is impossible for Him to reject us all even if we disobey Him and defy His command. He says: *Thus says the Lord: If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord* [Jer. 31:37]. In like manner this notification came previously in the text of the *Torah* through *Moses our Master*. It says: *Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God* [Lev. 26:44]. [**26**]

So rely upon these true texts, O our brethren, and be not alarmed by the succession of *persecutions* and the power over us or the weakness of our community [kalima].[7] All this is to test and purify, so that only the saints and the pious of the seed of *Jacob our father*, the pure and chaste seed, will adhere to our religion, those of whom it is said: *And among the remnant those whom the Lord shall call* [Joel 3:5]. The verse explains that they are few, they being people *whose ancestors were present at Mount Sinai and heard the speech from the Almighty*, raised their right hands for the covenant of God, and registered themselves to obey and accept, saying, *"We will do, and we will obey"* [Exod. 24:7]. They imposed this upon themselves and their descendants, as it says: *For us and our children forever* [Deut. 29:28]. God, the Exalted, has guaranteed—He is a sufficient guarantor—and notified us that all those who were present at *the Gathering at Mount Sinai* justify and believe in the prophecy of *Moses our Master* and all that he revealed, they and their descendants and their descendants' descendants throughout time. So God, the Exalted, said: *Lo I will come to you in a thick cloud, [in order that the people may hear when I speak with you,] and so trust you ever after* [Exod. 19:9]. Therefore, let everyone know who deviates from this religion of His [**S 90**] that was revealed at that great assembly that he is not an offspring of these people. This is what they (peace be on them) say concerning the one who doubts: *His ancestors were not present at Mount Sinai* [see, e.g., B.T., Nedarim 20a]. May God preserve you and us from doubt, and may He remove from you and us confusion and the delusion that brings it about and traps us in it. [**28**]

Now then, O our brethren, all *Israel dispersed to the ends of the earth*, you must fortify one another. Your elders should guide your young, and your elite guide your common folk. Let all of your community [kalima] consent to the immutable and irreplaceable verity, and to the propagation of the truth that shall never fail or falter. It is that God, the Exalted, is one unlike other ones. And *Moses*, His prophet and spokesman [kalīm], is the

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master and most perfect of all the prophets. He apprehends of God what none of the prophets before him did, nor will any in the future. This entire *book* of the *Torah* from the "b" of *bereshit* to the "l" of *yisra'el* is the word of God to *Moses our Master*, to whom He said therein: *With him do I speak mouth to mouth* [Num. 12:8]. It will never be abrogated, supplanted, augmented, or diminished. Never shall there come a Law from God aside from this, and neither positive nor negative commandments. Remember *the Gathering at Mount Sinai* which God has commanded us to commemorate always and warned us not to forget. And he obligated us to teach it to our children so that they grow up knowing it, as He, the Exalted, said (He is beyond saying): *But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind so long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children: The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb* [Deut. 4:9–10].

It is imperative, O our brethren, that you educate your children by presenting to their imagination that great assembly and relate its greatness and nobility at every gathering. For it is the pivot of the religion and the proof leading to certainty. [**30**] Extol it as God, the Exalted, has glorified it, saying: *For ask now about former ages, long before your own, and so on. Has any people heard the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire?* [Deut. 4:32–33].

Know, O our brethren in this covenant and faith, that this great thing that came into existence, and that the best of witnesses attested, was unprecedented and will not be superseded, namely, that an entire nation [umma] should hear the speech of God, the Exalted, and actually see His light [nūr]. He only did this so that the faith be firmly implanted, so that nothing can alter it, and so that we attain through it certainty that will bolster us in these hard times of intense *persecutions* [**S 91**] and total domination; as God, the Exalted, says, giving a reason for this: *For God has come only in order to test you, and so on* [Exod. 20:17]. That is to say, that He has only revealed Himself thus so that you be firm at any *trial* that he will try you with hereafter. Do not slip or err; and be steadfast, O our brethren, in your covenant and abide in your faith and fidelity.

Solomon (*peace be upon him*) compared the entire community [milla] to a lovely woman of perfect, unblemished appearance, saying: *Every part of you is fair, my darling; and there is no blemish in you* [Song of Songs 4:7]. And he compared the adherents of these religions and faiths, who wish to attract her to them and allure her to their doctrine, as deceiving profligates who seduce pure women for lewd ends. Thus do they [**32**] deceive and

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allure us to themselves, so that we might accept their religion and believe in their opinions. Then he replied in his wisdom in the name of the community [milla], as though it were saying to those who wish to deceive it and to make their faith appear grand: "Why are you grasping me? Can you provide me with the joy of the two camps?" That is, she disputes them, saying: "Provide me with something like *the Gathering at Mount Sinai*, where *the camp of Israel faced the camp of God*, then we shall embrace your opinion." This is what he says, metaphorically: *Turn back, turn back, O maid of Shulem! Turn back, turn back, that we may gaze upon you. Why will you gaze at the Shulammite in the dance of the two camps?* [Song of Songs 7:1]. *Shulammite* means the perfect and virtuous; *the dance of the two camps* is the joy of *the Gathering at Mount Sinai*, where *the camp of Israel* was—as it says: *Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God* [Exod. 19:17]—and where *the camp of God* was—as it explains, saying: *God's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands*[8] [Ps. 68:18].

Consider the wisdom and the deep meanings of the proverb. It repeated the word *turn back* four times in this *verse*, alluding to our being importuned to abandon our religion and to join them during each of the *four kingdoms*, of which we are now living under the last. God, the Exalted, forewarned us in a text of the *Torah* that they would compel us to believe in their opinions, as it says: *There you will serve man-made gods of wood and stone* [Deut. 4:28]. Nevertheless, [the persecution] will not be universal throughout [**34**] the entire earth, and God will never disinherit us of His Law, as He guaranteed, saying: *Since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring* [Deut. 31:21]. And He explained to us by means of *Isaiah*, the herald of the community [bashīr al-milla], that the sign between us and Him, the Exalted, and the proof showing that we shall not perish is the continuation of God's Law and word among us. The Exalted said: *And as for Me, this shall be My covenant with them, said the Lord, and so on* [Isa. 59:21].

The community [milla] has prided itself before God, the Exalted, for its having suffered the calamities of the *persecutions* and the harshness of His severity. It says, *It is for Your sake that we are being slain all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered* [Ps. 44:23]. [The sages] (*may their memory be a blessing*) said in *Midrash Ḥazita*: *"For Your sake" refers to the generation that suffers persecution* [Song of Songs Rabbah 1.3]. Thus its people should rejoice [**S 92**] at the calamities, loss of property, dislocation, and total deprivation. For all of this is a source of glory [fakhr] and a great achievement for them before God, the Exalted. And whatever happens to them is like *a burnt offering upon the altar*; and it shall be said to

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them: *Dedicate yourselves to the Lord this day . . . that He may bestow a blessing upon you today* [Exod. 32:29].

Therefore, they ought to flee and run off *after the Lord*, entering deserts and wastelands, and not mind separation from relatives or loss of property. For all this is a slight and paltry trifle vis-à-vis God, King of kings, possessor of the universe, *this honored and awesome Name, the Lord your God* [Deut. 28:58]. *He may be trusted to reward you well in this world and in the World to Come.* Thus we have found that virtuous and pure folk, those who prefer the truth and apprehend it, seek refuge with the religion of God from the most distant parts of the earth, heading for the homes of [**36**] scholars to increase their insight into the Law, the better to receive a goodly reward from God. How much more should a man seek refuge for the sake of the entire Law! We find that when an individual's livelihood is hard for him in one country, he emigrates to another. How much more should he emigrate to another when his belief in the religion of God is difficult for him in a certain place!

Should he find it impossible to emigrate for some time, he must not be careless and lapse into *desecration of the Sabbath* and eating forbidden foods, supposing that he is exempt from most of the Law. This Law—no individual of *the children of Jacob* shall ever desist from it, neither he, nor his descendants, nor their descendants, whether he wishes or not. He will be punished for discarding commandments or transgressing prohibitions. No one should suppose that, having committed grave sins, he is exempt from minor obligations so that he neglects them. For *Jeroboam, son of Nebat (may his bones be ground to dust)*, was punished both for worshipping the [golden] *calves*, by which *he sinned and caused Israel to sin*, and also for neglecting to build a *booth* on *the Feast of Tabernacles*. This principle [lit., root] is one of the foundations of the Law. Study it, teach it, and apply it accordingly.

❧

You mentioned the affair of *the apostate* [*ha-posheʿa*] who has made people believe that "[*I shall increase him*] *exceedingly*" [*be-meʾod meʾod*] [Gen. 17:20] refers to that individual [Muhammad]; and similarly its saying, *He appeared from Mount Paran* [Deut. 33:2] [**38**] alludes to him; [**S 93**] and similarly its saying, *A prophet from your midst, of your brethren, like me* [Deut. 18:15]; and similarly His promise to *Ishmael*, *I will make of him a great nation* [Gen. 17:20]. These arguments are tedious even to those who cite them. Not only are they utterly feeble, but using them as proof is ridiculous, pure folly. These are things that need not cause any doubt, not even

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among the many and the gullible. And the *apostates* themselves who deceive by their means have no illusions on this score and are not themselves duped. By citing these statements they only strive to gain stature among the *gentiles*,[9] and to show them that they believe the Qur'anic statement that the individual [Muhammad] is mentioned in the *Torah*. However, the Muslims themselves do not believe in these proofs. They do not accept them or use them as proof as they are so obviously false. Since they could find no sort of proof in the entire *Torah*, not a single text that might be ambiguous or mislead that they might latch onto, they resorted to saying: "You have replaced and altered the *Torah*, and have erased the name of *so-and-so* from it." They found no better proof than this, despite its being thoroughly indecent and improper. Its falsehood is obvious to the many and the elite since the *Torah* had been translated into Syriac, Greek, Persian, and Latin hundreds of years before this individual appeared. Furthermore, it has been transmitted from people to people in the East and the West. And not **[40]** one variation is found in all of this, not even in a dot, let alone a change in meaning, for they rendered it meticulously.[10] Only lack of an ambiguous text in the *Torah* forced them to rely upon this weak proof.

Its saying *A great nation* [Gen. 17:20] does not refer to [a people possessing] prophecy or the Law, but merely to being a great number. It has said concerning *idolaters*: *Nations greater and more numerous than you* [Deut. 11:23]. Similarly, its saying *be-me'od me'od* [Gen. 17:20] means "exceedingly." If [God's] intention were that *so-and-so* [Muhammad] would emerge from [the nation], He would have said: *I shall bless him be-me'od me'od*. Then it would have been possible for whoever hangs onto spider webs to say that it means: "*I shall bless him* that *so-and-so* may be his seed." However, its saying *be-me'od me'od* after *I will multiply him* indicates that it is a hyperbole expressing a multitude of numbers.

God, the Exalted, explained in the *Torah*, addressing *Abraham*, that all the blessings that God, the Exalted, promised him, giving a Law to his children and singling them out, will only be through the descendants of *Isaac*. He [Ishmael] is ancillary to the blessings of *Isaac*, as He says: *As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed* [Gen. 21:13]. He has thus explained that the root is *Isaac* and that he [Ishmael] is an adjunct. The Exalted has announced: *For it is through Isaac that seed shall be called to you* [Gen. 21:12], omitting *Ishmael* altogether. That is, though his progeny may be numerous, they will not **[42]** [**S 94**] be preeminent or favored or distinguished for sharing in human perfection, so that one might thereby become famous and renowned. Rather, your preeminence will become known by means of your preeminent progeny,

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Likewise, when *Deborah* described to the community [milla] *the Gathering at Mount Sinai*, namely, that the light was going gradually from mountain to mountain, she said: *O Lord, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom, and so on* [Judg. 5:4]. And the *sages* (*may their memory be a blessing*) explained[12] that before the time of *Moses our Master* God sent a messenger [**46**] to the Romans and offered them the *Torah* but they did not accept it of him. Then He sent another [messenger] to the Arabs, who offered it to them but they did not accept it of him. Then He sent us *Moses our Master* and we accepted, saying: *All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey* [Exod. 24:7]. All this is something that happened before the revelation of the *Torah*. Hence, verbs in the past tense were used: *He came, He shone, He appeared*. They are not prefigurations of what will happen.

As for finding a proof in its saying, *A prophet from your midst, of your brethren* [Deut. 18:15]—you said that some of the people were deceived by this, while doubt was removed from others because of its saying *from your midst*. I greatly wonder at someone deceived by this or who supposes that this leaves room for doubt, and that he resolves it by means of its saying *from your midst*, and that were it not for its saying *from your midst, of your brethren*, this might have been a proof. Now you must concentrate and understand what I am about to say. Know that one is not permitted to detach a statement from its context and use it as proof. One should rather ascertain meaning by the context so as to know the speaker's intention. Then it may be used as proof. If one may adduce proof from discourse taken out of context, then one might say that God (may He be blessed and exalted) has forbidden us in the *Torah* to obey any prophet, as He says: *Do not heed the words of that prophet* [Deut. 13:4]. And similarly, we might say that God commanded us to practice *idolatry*, for He says, [**48**] *There you will serve man-made gods, and so on* [Deut. 4:28]. And many similar examples could be cited in every discourse, but this is obviously false. For one ought never to bring a proof from a text until its contextual meaning is determined. Only then will its intention be understood.

This *verse*, then, *A prophet from your midst* [Deut. 18:15], should be viewed contextually. Then it will be understood and no doubt whatever will remain. At the beginning of this *portion* [of the Law] God forbids our indulging in augury, divination, astrology, witchcraft, charms, and the like. Through these things the [gentile] nations [milal] suppose that they can know future events before they occur and take [appropriate] precautions. When the Exalted forbade our indulging in these, He said to us: "All the nations [milal] suppose that they can know the future this way. But you shall

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